

Daphne Bramham: We need citizens, not just taxpayers and bookkeepers

BY DAPHNE BRAMHAM, VANCOUVER SUN SEPTEMBER 15, 2014



Premier Christy Clark (left) listens as B.C. Finance Minister Mike de Jong tables the provincial budget in the Legislative Assembly in February. Last week, de Jong explained that even though the province has a budget surplus, taxpayers wouldn't stand for that money being spend on teachers.

Photograph by: CHAD HIPOLITO, THE CANADIAN PRESS

A citizen is a rare thing these days in Canada. Citizens have been expunged from the political lexicon and replaced with taxpayers and, as elections approach, voters.

Decrying the loss of a word may seem a bit pedantic. But words are powerful. They frame debates and influence our thinking.

Use the word taxpayer instead of citizen and the debate can only be about money.

Use citizen and the focus moves beyond economics, opening the prospect that the discussion might include other considerations, such as the common good.

By using the word citizens, taxpaying adults and corporations aren't the only ones to be considered. Children, the poor and the vulnerable must also be part of the discussion.

I was struck by all of this recently when I listened to provincial Finance Minister Mike de Jong explain why even though the province has a budget surplus, taxpayers wouldn't stand for that money being spent on teachers.

Of course, British Columbia's 40,000 teachers are taxpayers as well as citizens. As for those nearly half a million schoolchildren who aren't attending classes as the strike drags on, few are likely to be taxpayers, but they are citizens.

Perhaps it is unsurprising for a finance minister to think only in terms of money and of taxpayers, not of citizens.

But de Jong is not alone among the B.C. Liberals, and the B.C. Liberals are far from the only politicians who have deliberately removed the word citizen from their vocabularies.

The deliberate replacement of citizen with taxpayer began in the 1980s with the American anti-tax

movement and has been promoted in Canada by groups like the Fraser Institute and the Canadian Taxpayers Federation, whose attention focuses narrowly on fiscal matters.

Along with that change, politicians began talking more about how much governments spend, and less about the wide range of services that money provides — including health care, courts, policing, environmental protection, roads, transit, funding for the arts, and education.

A few years ago, the federal Conservatives went so far as to write a [Taxpayer Bill of Rights](#).

It certainly wasn't necessary since there is nothing in it that isn't already covered by the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, including the rights to privacy, service in both official language and due process.

But curiously, it says that taxpayers have "the right to receive entitlements and to pay no more or no less than is required by law", as well as "courteous treatment" and "timely information."

It carries with it the suggestion that government services and courtesy are somehow not available to all.

The Harper government has so effectively eliminated the word citizen that it only seems to be used in the context of denying citizenship rights to people like child soldier Omar Khadr, stripping citizenship rights from others, or using it as bait among ethnic voters.

Keeping an eye on debt and deficits is important. But governing means more than just balancing budgets, as citizenship implies much more than just being a taxpayer.

To be a citizen means to belong, to have responsibilities, rights and shared values. It means having a stake in the future and, in democracies, a voice in determining what that future might look like.

In Canada, it means having the guarantee that laws will be applied fairly to every person and every institution (including governments), as well as the right to an education and health care.

That is why we pay taxes. It's the cost and the duty of belonging.

As the terminology has shifted from citizen to taxpayer over the past three decades, maybe it is only coincidental that the gap between rich and poor has widened.

Perhaps it's also only coincidence that voter turnout has spiralled downward as the poor and the young (too many of whom are unemployed or under-employed and often burdened by huge debts from post-secondary education fees that have nearly tripled in the last two decades) decide not to bother exercising their franchise.

A growing body of economic research confirms that wealth isn't the best predictor or guarantor of happy or healthy societies.

What matters more is feeling connected, belonging and having a say. In other words, being a full citizen.

So, as the teachers' strike drags on and as we head into November municipal elections and a federal one in 2015, let's reinstate "citizen" and all that it implies.

Let's insist on it, if only as a reminder that we aren't just taxpayers, and politicians ought to be more than just bookkeepers.

dbramham@vancouver.sun.com

© Copyright (c) The Vancouver Sun